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ABSTRACT

The Schools Reaching Out (SRO) program suggests that the achievement of low-income urban students can be raised through a "paradigm shift" to beliefs in success for all children in school, and the necessity of parent involvement for achieving that success. SRO attempts to change the traditional distant relationship between schools and parents in the following ways: (1) bringing parents and teachers together more often for a variety of purposes; (2) increasing communication between school and home; (3) making parents an integral part of the school environment; (4) developing outreach programs to recruit parents who have not been previously involved with the schools; (5) offering mutually supportive parent programs; (6) using third party intervention to resolve problems between parents and the school; (7) emphasizing active listening, empowerment, and respect in parent-teacher interactions; and (8) involving parents in informal decision making. A review of effective urban school programs suggests that the School Development Model and the Accelerated Schools program could be combined into a model for school reform. SRO has developed a Sequential Model for Family-School Collaboration for Children's Learning that outlines the process for building successful school-parent relationships. Two figures are included. A list of 24 references is appended. (FMW)

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Can Parent Involvement Lead to Increased Student Achievement in Urban Schools?

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Can Parent Involvement Lead to Increased Student Achievement in Urban Schools?

The Link Between Parent Involvement and School Achievement

The evidence that parent involvement activities enhance children's school success is overwhelming. Anne Henderson, who has done the most extensive literature review on the topic (1981; 1987) concludes: "the evidence is now beyond dispute: parent involvement improves student achievement. When parents are involved, children do better in school, and they go to better schools: (1987, p. 1). She explains that there is no one best way to involve parents, but "what works is for parents to be involved in a variety of roles over a period of time. The intensity of contact is important: "public-relations campaigns, one-way communication devices, or dog-and-pony shows are not effective" (p. 6). "The form of parent involvement does not seem as important as that it is reasonably well-planned, comprehensive, and long-lasting" (1987, p.2).

The positive effects of parent involvement on student achievement are sustained across grade levels (preschool through high school), in programs that are home- or school-based, and for programs in low and middle income settings. There is a caveat about programs in low-income settings, however. Although studies demonstrate that parent involvement activities in low-income settings are effective in helping students achieve better than matched controls, the gains are often not sufficient to bring the achievement scores of children with involved parents to the national average (see Cochran, 1987; Gillium, 1977; Swap, 1990a; Tizard, Schofield, and Hewison, 1982; and Walberg, Bole, and Waxman, 1980).

To illustrate these points, consider the parent involvement program that was initiated in an elementary school in one of the most economically depressed sections of Chicago (Walberg, Bole, and Waxman, 1980). The purpose of the year-long program was to increase students' reading achievement. It was planned and carried out by a parent-staff steering committee and included several components: a contract which specified how parents would support children's school achievement during the year (signed by 99% of the parents); social activities to promote school pride and determination to achieve; a booklet for parents to increase their awareness of how to encourage children's reading at home; and several book fairs to enable parents to buy and trade books.

Some teachers embraced the program much more intensively than others, by "requesting, encouraging, and enabling better ties between the classroom and home activities" (p. 511). Using these

naturally occurring differences to evaluate the effects of the parent involvement program, the investigators determined that "Students and classroom groups intensively exposed to the program gained .5 to .6 grade equivalents more than those less intensively exposed during the year" (p. 509). Students in the intensively involved group gained an average of 1.1 grade equivalents, while students less intensively involved gained only .5 grade equivalents over the course of the year. A series of ordered stepwise regression analyses were run to estimate the effect of extensive exposure in the designated classes and to explore the contribution of other possible variables to the effect size. Prior reading comprehension scores and program intensity accounted for nearly all the reliable variance in the posttest scores of both individuals and class groups.

There are several interesting conclusions to draw from this study. One, of course, is the usefulness of parent involvement activities in significantly improving children's reading scores. A second is that even a 1.1 average gain in reading scores over the course of the year would not bring the achievement of these students to the national average. Median pretest scores in the school were 2.79 grade equivalents, while the mean grade level of the students was 3.76. Acceleration of considerably more than a year per year would be needed to make up the initial discrepancy. Finally, as the authors suggest, "It cannot be inferred that such high rates of gains...can be sustained throughout a particular child's career in the inner city" (p. 514). It is not clear whether the program was implemented again the following year, and if so, what changes occurred.

Attacking the Achievement Barrier Through the Schools Reaching Out Project

The weight of evidence from low income settings suggests that in order to increase achievement scores enough to reach the national average, a more radical, enduring, and comprehensive program of school reform and parent partnership is required. This conclusion was reached by Don Davies at Boston University, who initiated the Schools Reaching Out program in 1988 to explore the connection between students' success and parent and community involvement in schools in low income urban settings. Davies (1988) drew on David Seeley's work (1986) to suggest that what was required to break the achievement barrier in low income urban schools was a "paradigm shift" that had two essential and interlocked components: a belief in success for **all** children in school, and a belief that parent involvement is **necessary** for achieving that success.

The Schools Reaching Out (SRO) program had three foci:
1. establishing pilot programs in two city schools in low income settings based on these principles;
2. visiting and evaluating successful programs across the country

that linked community outreach and student achievement; and
3. beginning a network of schools, called The League of Schools Reaching Out, that shared the common purpose of increasing student achievement and family and community connections with schools.

I was the researcher for the SRO project who was charged with the task of evaluating the link between parent and community outreach and student achievement. The remainder of this paper draws on my experience in the two pilot schools in New York and in Boston, visits to model sites across the country, and an extensive literature review.

Progress in the Pilot Sites

SRO's experience in the two pilot schools indicated that the "paradigm shift" faced stiff attitudinal opposition. A full description of these schools and their communities may be found elsewhere (Jackson, 1990; Swap, 1990b); both are midsize elementary schools serving primarily African-American and Latino children in low-income city neighborhoods. It is common in urban schools to believe that academic success is an elusive goal for most children. As expected, in interviews conducted in the pilot schools with teachers, specialists, and administrators (Swap, 1990b), most had reservations about the possibility of success for all children given their concerns about the kinds of children who were in school these days. "Children with handicaps, who were non-English speaking, whose families were chemically dependent or abusive were seen as posing severe problems to traditional educational practices and unlikely to achieve according to typical indicators of success" (p. 33-34). For many of the educators, family background defined the possibility of success. As one said, if a child "doesn't dress well," "if his parents don't show up," if "he doesn't present himself well," he is not as likely to do well in school (Swap, 1990b, p. 73).

The advisability of school personnel linking with parents to secure high student achievement was also considered suspect by some educators. One teacher expressed this view most extremely by saying "I stay in my classroom. I don't get involved" (p. 27). Interviews in these pilot schools, however, echoed the conclusions of other researchers who discovered that most educators express positive attitudes about parent involvement and believe it can contribute to student achievement (e.g., Epstein, 1987; Krasnow, 1990). In data collected by the teacher research team (see Krasnow, 1990), a teacher expressed this view clearly: "We need their support; we are a team. They need to be a part of their children's education. That doesn't mean they sit in the class, but by being supportive at home, their involvement is very important" (Swap, 1990b, p. 27).

Constraints emerge because educators do not always know how to initiate or accomplish parent involvement (Epstein, 1982); and

because tradition in schools tends to support an orientation that says that urban parents and educators are "worlds apart" (Lightfoot, 1978; Swap, 1990a) and are likely to stay that way (Swap, in press). In urban schools in particular, teachers often have reservations about the competence of parents to support their children's educational achievement, and many have concerns about too much intrusion of parents into areas that have traditionally been under their control. As one teacher explained, "Parents should not come in to spy and gossip" (Swap, 1990b, p. 26).

Progress in Achieving Home-School Partnerships. This information is presented to underline the challenge involved in accomplishing a shift in paradigm or ideology about the nature of the relationship between schooling and student achievement and family involvement and student success. In two short years, the Schools Reaching Out project made a beginning at shifting some of the fundamental regularities of school life that keep families and educators apart. Although perhaps not initially planned, the major thrust of the project became that part of the paradigm that insisted that family and community involvement was essential for student achievement. The traditional distant relationships between parents and educators were challenged and changed in several ways. Specifically:

1. In comparison with past practice, parents and educators got together more often, for a greater variety of purposes, and under more nurturing conditions. A whole array of activities was initiated in both schools. e.g., potluck dinners, breakfast meetings, workshops led by teachers, a career day, discussion seminars, a school community planning council. These activities began the important process of building relationships based on first-hand information and trust.

2. Efforts to increase communication between home and school got a huge boost from this project. Regular newsletters from the principal, welcoming letters to parents from teachers, activities for parents to try out with children at home all underlined the importance of home-school connections. They also suggested that even parents who could not be involved at school were connected to the school and had an important role to play in their children's motivation and achievement.

3. Schools sometimes seem like impregnable citadels to parents, where they are invited only to discuss problems their children are having. Through SRO, parents became a regular presence **in the schools**. The Parent Center, a room with adult furniture, a coffeepot, a telephone, and caring parent coordinators became a hub of parent activity and support for the schools. The mini-grant program brought parents into the school to enrich the curriculum. Seventeen teachers at P.S. 111 and eleven teachers at the Ellis took advantage of the

stipend of $250 to plan a project that involved parents. For example, parents worked with the art teacher to help students do research on masks and make masks; families contributed to oral histories of the community as part of a social studies and writing unit; parents helped plan field trips and supported children in writing about their experiences. The volunteer program brought parents and community members into the school to read to children, help children in the library, offer enrichment activities, and support the continuous work of the schools. Ongoing relationships between parents and educators were generated through this regular contact, and greater mutual respect was developed on both sides. For example, in interviews, parent volunteers spoke admiringly of teachers' patience in the classroom, and teachers acknowledged the importance and usefulness of parent contributions to the school.

4. Parents responded to the efforts to involve them quickly and in large numbers. At P.S. 111. for example, hundreds came to an evening celebration of multiculturalism, and there were waiting lists for field trips. This significant response from parents occurred because the outreach was sincere, based on parents' interests and needs, and well-planned and executed. A wonderful parent outreach program developed at the Ellis for parents not previously involved at the school was carried out by four women from the community with education and social work backgrounds. These outreach workers went to homes and offered information to parents about parenting concerns, ideas and strategies for supporting learning at home, and connections to other services and agencies in the city. They were enthusiastically received by over 20 families and most of these families became connected to the school. The drama of this response and the enthusiasm and concern of parents posed a direct challenge to common assumptions that parents are too busy, too troubled, or too unconcerned to become involved with the school.

5. Programs offered mutual support in **important** areas. For example, parents were able to take courses in English as a second language or prepare for high school equivalency exams. Teachers and parents learned how to reinforce each other's work to improve children's reading. In one school, the deliberations of the School Community Planning Council led to a much-needed after-school program. Teachers were able to enrich their curriculum and provide more individualized help to children through the mini-grant and volunteer programs. Thus, these parent outreach programs avoided the fragmentation and focus on trivia that characterizes many less careful efforts. Moreover, the notion that family involvement in schools is **necessary** to support student achievement was consistently underlined by the unexpectedly positive results of these collaborative efforts for adults and children.

6. Discussion of the hard issues that can jettison emerging relationships was facilitated by third party intervention. For example, the SRO staff insisted on discussing goals of teachers, administrators, and parents in the Planning Council meetings in New York and helped members air differences and move toward consensus.

7. SRO staff members tried to model in their relationships with educators and parents a different set of values that might characterize interactions. Best described in Jean Krasnow's work (1990), emphasis was placed on careful listening to one another, empowering individuals to speak their minds and make decisions about the conditions that influenced their lives in school, acknowledgement of the complexities of change and the need for continuous reflection in shaping school practice, and celebrating the contributions and accomplishments of individuals and groups.

8. SRO was not very successful in its attempt to involve parents in important formal decision-making in the school. At the Ellis school, parent involvement in the steering committee was spotty the first year and refused by the principal the second year; at P.S. 111 the genuine effort to seek parents' opinions in planning council meetings did not result in full participation. These parents were more comfortable in informal meetings in smaller groups, and additional training in school-based management was needed by both parents and educators.

These efforts were successful in beginning to change attitudes about the usefulness and necessity of parent involvement: the many activities and connections have created a new scaffolding for partnership built from pleasant contacts and mutual support. As one teacher at P.S. 111 explained, parents are now seen as "very good, trained, and not just wondering about their own child. Parents have a broader perspective." The teacher felt that parents' attitudes had also changed toward teachers. "They are not in awe. They see teachers as easier to get along with and don't feel intimidated. The meetings between parents and teachers with food and chit-chat have made it easier for teachers to send home notes and communicate with parents. Parents take immediate steps to respond. More parents are responding immediately, and that helps with discipline." The teacher also felt that there was more to be done. "Some things have happened. So much time has been spent. There are very good feelings. It's just starting to gel. What's going to happen?" (Swap, 1990b, pp. 29-30).

It is not logical to expect that such fundamental changes in traditional practice could be stabilized in two years. But there has been growth in moving toward home-school partnership that could be further encouraged in each school with continued coordination of the family outreach program, support by the principal, and further

training of parents and educators in working together. It is important that the limitations that have occurred in fully implementing a partnership model not be seen as failures but as natural steps in a developmental model.

Progress in Achieving Success for all Children in the Pilot Schools. As it turned out, the concept of success for all children did not receive significant attention at the Ellis School, and it did not shape changes in practice. The reasons for this are complex but were significantly influenced by a 40% turnover of staff and replacement of the principal, assistant principal, and district administrator at the beginning of the second year of the project. Not surprisingly, achievement scores and other indicators of student success did not show improvement over the two years of the project.

At P. S. 111, a different mission was pursued, namely: "To create a unique literate environment that meets the specific needs of our students" (Swap, 1990b, p. 38). This mission, announced by the principal early in 1989 and later translated into "A Teacher's Guide to P.S. 111 Language Initiative" did drive curriculum choices, scheduling, instructional practice, staff training priorities, and outreach to parents. This comprehensive effort resulted in many interesting enrichment projects, an important emphasis on whole language approaches to teaching and writing across the curriculum, much more time spent on meaningful reading at home and at school, much writing productivity, and a 12.5% average gain in reading achievement scores during 1988-89, the largest jump in scores of any school in District 2. Almost 46% of the children were reading at or above grade level based on this achievement battery (DRO, Degree of Reading Proficiency). Scores that reflect progress during the second year of SRO should be available shortly.

The Language Initiative was not driven by a belief in success for all children, and it was not initiated as a result of a school-wide assessment of needs or consensus among the faculty. The mission and many of the activities that were based on the mission were mandated by the principal. Nonetheless, teachers became involved in shaping and implementing a whole language program, and parents were consistently informed about how they could help their children improve in reading and writing. SRO contributed to the success of the language initiative by providing financial resources, suggestions for involving parents, and new vehicles for communication and consultation within the school. The principal's adaptation of useful elements from the SRO program into a more traditional hierarchical framework of decision making was an interesting result of the project and perhaps a practical response to a short-term third party intervention. Nonetheless, the relative openness of the administrators and teachers to experimenting with new models of parent involvement, decision-making, and collegiality despite widespread experience with short-

lived innovations was testimony to their optimism and courage.

Lessons from Other Urban Schools

A review of the literature suggested that there were few urban schools that had succeeded in breaking the achievement barrier as defined in this paper. As a second focus of SRO, we looked for documented evidence of success or for nominations of programs that showed promise for demonstrating effective models of home-school partnership connected with seeking success for all children.

Only two programs will be reviewed here: the School Development Model (or Comer process) and the Accelerated Schools program. (For a fuller description of the literature review and visits to sites with promising programs, please see Zeldin, 1990 and Swap, 1990b.) The School Development Model, developed by James Comer, a psychiatrist at the Yale Child Study Institute, was initiated in two pilot schools in New Haven in the 1970's (see Comer, 1980, 1988a; 1988b, 1988c). The Accelerated Schools Model was developed by Henry Levin and others from Stanford, and initiated in two schools beginning in 1987 (see Hopfenberg, Levin, Meister, and Rogers, 1990; Levin, 1987). Both programs are being replicated in many sites across the country. Comer's schools, especially the flagship schools such as Columbia Park in Prince George's County have broken the achievement barrier (see Comer, 1988b). At the Columbia Park School, for example, the principal Pat Green told me that average math achievement scores for her students were in the 90th percentile, while reading scores were above the 50th percentile. This was the case even though the school is in a very low income area, and over 30% of the children are transferred on a yearly basis. Levin has not yet provided a systematic review of achievement data since the project is still very new. Nonetheless, he reported in the newly created Schools Reaching Out newsletter that one of the two pilot schools is currently boasting the highest achievement gains in the district.

These two programs have much in common:

1. Both identify parent involvement as a major component of reform and include parents in every aspect of the school program (e.g., as volunteers, decision-makers, learners, partners in home-school learning).

2. Both have developed new structures for decision making in schools that include parents. In Comer schools, the School Planning and Management team meets regularly to identify targets for school improvement and to link staff development and evaluation plans to those targets. In Accelerated Schools, the steering committee involves the community in setting priorities in conjunction with their mission, and three or four task forces work over a year term to implement those priorities.

3. Both insist on a comprehensive approach to school reform, where all groups work in a collaborative fashion and resources, programs, staff development, and structures all serve the goals identified.

4. Both seek a transformation of the culture in the service of school reform. In the Comer model, the transformation is driven by an emphasis on the importance or relationships for children and adults. Comer believes that children's learning is based in part on bonding, imitation, and identification with significant adults, and that continuity in goals and values between home and school is very important, especially for children at risk for educational failure. Development of program adaptations to serve children's needs is coordinated through the Student Staff Services team which brings together all relevant personnel (administrators, teachers, parents, specialists, psychologists) to address concerns of individuals and groups in the school. The creation of a nurturing and supportive environment for adults is an essential component of the model.

The Accelerated Schools model also seeks transformation based on three principles (unity of purpose, empowerment with accountability, and building on strengths) and seven values (equity, participation, communication/community, reflection, experimentation, trust, and risk-taking). Values and principles guide relationships for adults and children, as in the Comer model.

5. Both models place heavy emphasis on the need for training for educators and parents. This training involves visits to effective schools, seminars in principles and strategies, regular follow-up meetings within and across teams, connections among faculty in participating schools, and often the services of consultants to support the identification of resources, contribute to data analysis, and provide suggestions and feedback about crucial group skills.

6. In all the model schools that I visited, support from the central administration was central and visible.

There are some interesting differences:

1. The Accelerated Schools (AS) model focuses on success for all children as a mission and stresses accountability by identifying specific academic targets (e.g., all children will be at or above grade level by grade six). Comer's primary objective is not academic achievement but a positive school climate which supports the overall development of students.

2. The Accelerated Schools (AS) model places a much heavier emphasis on the development of curricular and instructional approaches to accelerate children's achievement. This relative emphasis was clear to me in my site visits, for in the AS schools, new programs and pedagogical strategies were the focus of inquiry

and experimentation; in the Comer schools, curriculum and instructional practices were fairly traditional.

Implications for Schools Seeking to Achieve Success for All Children

A Model for School Reform. As summarized in the figure titled "Model for School Reform," my intensive look at the literature, at promising sites, and at our own experiences in the pilot schools suggested that urban schools are most likely to break the achievement barrier if:

1. They develop a mission and explicit goals and priorities derived from the mission that stress success for all children.

2. The management and decision-making structures support the mission.

3. Personnel recognize the need to transform the traditional culture in service of the mission and make explicit the values and principles which guide that transformation.

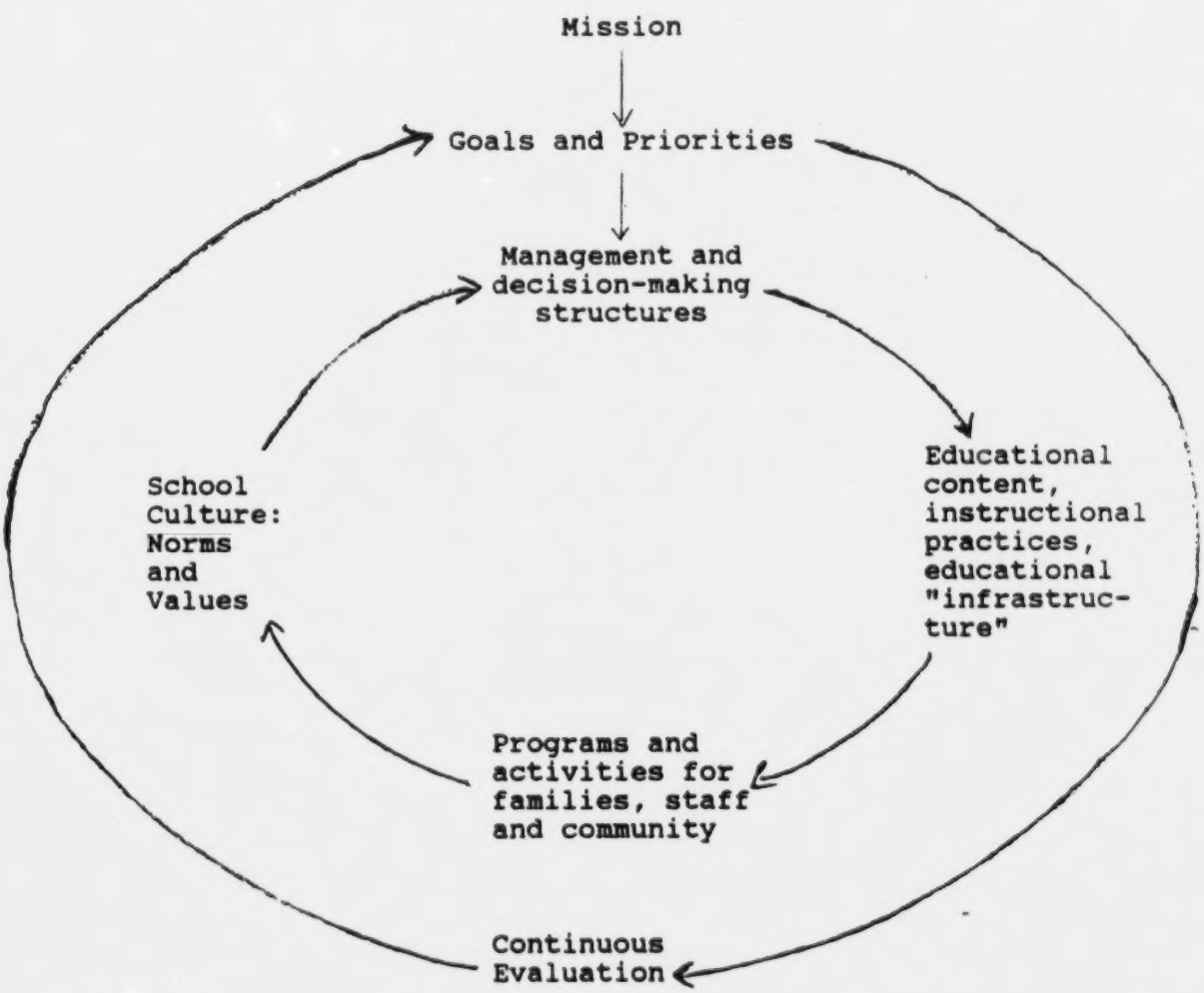
4. Instructional practices and curricula are regularly evaluated to ascertain their usefulness in supporting children's success in school. If children are not doing well in some areas or if identifiable subgroups are not doing well in some areas, then experimentation and inquiry will guide a search for improved practices and/or curriculum. Reform is seen as a cyclical and long-term process, not a quick fix.

5. Parent and community partnership with schools is seen as essential to achieving success for all children. Positive and multiple connections between home and school are seen as necessary for supporting children's learning and motivation, and the partnership provides vital resources and mutual support for adults as well as children.

6. Effective leadership is very important for at least three reasons: to build group investment and excitement about the challenge of school reform, to build capacity in group members to change practices and attitudes, and to consolidate and celebrate gains. Research continually shows that when principals do not endorse the reform efforts, those efforts fail (see, e.g., Kijai and Norman, 1990; Malen and Ogawa, 1988).

7. Support from central administration is certainly useful. What is needed is supportive policies (or at least the absence of policies which contradict the reform effort), financial resources, flexibility in administrative requirements or at least a process for appealing requirements that interfere with achieving the goals (see Timar, 1988 and Zeldin, 1990 for more information).

Model for School Reform


Mission
Goals and Priorities
Management and decision-making structures
Educational content, instructional practices, educational "infrastructure"
Programs and activities for families, staff and community
School Culture: Norms and Values
Continuous Evaluation

Enabling Factors

- Effective leadership
- Support from central administration
- Compatible policies (local, state, national)
- Capacity-building activities
- Resources

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8. State or local policies which support school reform have been helpful in sparking experimentation in many local schools. California, Kentucky, Dade County, Florida, Chicago, Rochester, and San Diego are examples of states or communities that have eased the process of initiating reform by adopting policies congruent with reform and supporting school experiments.

9. Training for all participants in the reform effort is essential, and training should include visits to promising models, development of new skills and knowledge in supportive teams, and follow-up consultation. Content should include such things as processes for collaborative decision making, skills needed for working in groups, information about the history and context of the school, background in understanding the administration, curriculum, and organization of public schools, and information about how to collect, analyze, and use school data to set priorities and evaluate programs.

10. Some resources are essential for undertaking reform, and time and money are the most valuable resources in schools. To meet its goals of reform, critical resources include (e.g.), money to purchase curriculum which serves the school's new purposes; money for training; and time for colleagues to meet, plan, make decisions, and evaluate programs.

A Sequential Model for Family-School Collaboration for Children's Learning. When SRO began, the staff did not have a clear idea about how to initiate an effective home-school partnership program. They were looking for a process that would emerge from the participants, while ironically, at least in some cases, school personnel were looking for explicit guidance and models for programs that worked elsewhere. As we reach the end of this phase of our study, it may be time to suggest a tentative outline of a sequential process for developing home-school partnerships (see figure, "Sequential Model for Family-School Collaboration for Children's Learning").

This model highlights the importance of announcing from the outset the importance of partnerships between home and school to achieve student success. It suggests the usefulness of early identification of a steering committee that includes parents as members whose charge is to develop a mission and related priorities, goals and objectives. It recommends selecting activities in accordance with priorities and attention to four important areas of home-school partnership: improving two-way communication, providing mutual support, enhancing learning at home and school, and promoting joint decision making. Finally, the model suggests regular evaluation of programs and activities from the perspectives of both children and adults to shape subsequent innovations.

This model recognizes the ongoing need to expand family and

Sequential Model for Family-School Collaboration for Children's Learning

INPUT		OUTPUT
Data on children's learning Relationship-building activities	1. Recognition of Critical Importance of Family-School Collaboration	Share national research with community; ask for help
Capacity-building activities	2. Family and Community Involvement in Developing Joint Mission	Share process and results with community
Capacity-building activities	3. Family and Community Participation on Steering Committee, Task Forces to develop goals, objectives and priorities	Share process and results with community
Resources	4. Selection of activities, structures, and programs to:	Newsletters Newspaper articles
Capacity-building activities	Improve two-way communication	Scrapbooks
	Provide mutual support	Children's Journals
Exposure to good models	Enhance learning at home and school	Videos Cable
	Promote joint decision making	Outreach Strategies
Data on children's learning and on adult experiences	5. Family and community involvement in assessing children's success and the usefulness of specific activities, structures and programs to achieve the mission (go back to #3)	Share process and results with community Request expanded involvement

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community involvement through relationship building activities and to monitor the involvement of families to ensure the representation of all subgroups. This model also underscores the importance of training to build the capacity of parents and educators to work together and anticipate common problems.

Finally, the model emphasizes the continuing need for two-way communication between home and school. The necessity for informing, shaping, and enlisting the involvement of parents and community personnel has never been more important than it is today, and investment of administrators and teachers in that outreach and education effort is crucial to developing or retaining the support of the community in securing student success.

Conclusion

Is it possible for parent involvement to lead to increased student achievement in urban schools? The answer from SRO is that it is possible, but it demands a long-term investment of time and energy from families and educators; the transformation of deeply held values, attitudes, and patterns of relationships; a healthy allocation of resources; dissemination of the most promising pedagogical strategies, curricula, and activities to ease the burden on individual sites; and a commitment to joint decision-making, mutual support, and continuous inquiry.

Could enough schools embark on such an ambitious effort to change the patterns of low student achievement so characteristic of our major cities? There are many reasons for optimism: the willingness of families and businesses to get involved and offer significant resources of time and money; the accessibility of models that work; the growing awareness of the need for fundamental reform at the local, state, and national levels; and the continuing evidence of the energy and courage of educators and families to commit themselves to working hard to enhance the futures of our children. It could happen.

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